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ORNSTEIN AND MODERN MUSIC

By CHARLES L. BUCHANAN

IT is not entirely irrational to claim that music has progressed through the last score of years at a rate of speed and with a degree of intensity unparalleled in any other epoch of its history. Twenty years ago Richard Strauss and Debussy were practically unheard in this country. Brahms, even, represented little more than a synonym for some excruciating kind of tediousness. In these last twenty years Richard Strauss has flamed his meteoric way into our ken—and out of it. His *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, once hailed as a last word, an ultimate in music, is now almost ignored for a kind of junk heap of fictitious, sterile splendors. Debussy and his evanescent harmonic scheme has wooed us, momentarily enthralled us and (I think I may dare say) ended by wearying us. We have found only vapors in his music when we have sought substance. Reger has had his little moment and gone his way.

Perhaps we may not rightly call this precipitant pace progress; whatever it is, it has culminated in a kind of contemporary music that seems to begin and end in a chronic cacophony. Music, as we of the Western world have understood it, is disciplined sound, sound made captive by a kind of mathematical set of figures and indications, sound arbitrarily compressed into intervals of whole tones and half tones and into certain conventional sequences of notes we call scales. The music of the last quarter of a century has tended unmistakably in the direction of a more acute perception, an obliterating of the boundary lines of conventional tonality. Consciously, or unconsciously, it has questioned whether our finite intelligences on which we pride ourselves have extracted a perfected beauty of ordered sound out of an embryonic beauty of disordered sound, or whether the forces of nature have withheld from us sound secrets of an esoteric and unimagined loveliness. In the most intense and salient manifestation that modern music has given—the music of Leo Ornstein—the question presents itself to us whether that sort of thing we call a mere primitive impressionism is in reality a keener degree of perception than our sophisticated senses attain to, or whether it represents a mere disorganized and uncorrelated sensory system. In other words, is



Leo Ornstein

law, as represented by our older ideas of harmony, rhythm, interval and so on, essential to the creation of a valid beauty, or does the emancipation of contemporary music from law, as we understand it, represent a kind of previsioning of some wider, keener music of the future?

Is it possible to attain to something approximating a just valuation of this latest development in music?

The other day, a writer whom we all know and admire was telling me that he made a hard and fast rule of never meeting an artist. He feared that if he did so the impersonal poise of his point of view might be distracted and impaired. The veteran critic, William Winter, felt otherwise. In his invaluable book on Richard Mansfield he distinctly affirms his belief that it is necessary for the reviewer to come in personal contact with the artist if he is to appraise the innermost pith and gist of the artist's significance.

I am saying this by way of a sort of explanation. Personally, I believe that the most significant insight we have into the extraordinary case of Leo Ornstein is revealed to us only through a direct intercourse with Ornstein's ideas. I believe that even now when Ornstein has smoothed down some of his most protuberant and irritating characteristics, the casual observer would receive a totally erroneous impression of his point of view. Judged hastily, his activities indubitably smack of charlatanism, and even to this day one would instinctively class them together with all the ruff-raff, boudoir esthetics that our nouveau riche type of contemporary artist imposes upon us. Perhaps, then, the following bit of autobiography may not be altogether impertinent.

A couple of seasons ago, when Ornstein came more or less forcibly into the public notice, I, amongst others, went to hear him. I think it is important to admit that I went prejudiced against him. One has to follow these things up, but I confess that my state of mind in the presence of radical departures and latest "revelations" is much the same as that of the bucolic gentleman in the anecdote who tells his friend that he is going to Bangor to get drunk, "and Lord, how I do dread it!" Perhaps this is a confession of incompetence; for my part I frankly admit that the moment a thing is thrust at me and flourished under my nose for its "progressiveness," etc., that is the very moment I am convinced that the stuff is spurious, premeditated and therefore absolutely negligible. I am congenitally suspicious of "movements", "trends", "time spirits", and all the rest of it; as a matter of cold fact I have never yet known any good to come of them; and

I confess that my first sight of Leo Ornstein did nothing to reassure me and to win my confidence in the validity of his art.

A short time after, I was commissioned by an editor to write an article on Ornstein. An appointment was made for us, and rather dreading the meeting I set out. I do not know just what I expected to meet, but it was something unpleasant. My preconceived visualization of Ornstein fluctuated between the mental image of a sort of debilitated Oscar Wilde and a miniature cave-man who would spring out at me from some unsuspected quarter, and whose conversation would be made up mostly of growls, snaps and snarls. I should not have been surprised if he had flourished a club or sprinkled his oysters with eau de cologne instead of horse radish.

Well, the Leo Ornstein I met was quite a different sort of person. I found him ingratiatingly frank, boyish, enthusiastic and lacking, in so far as I could see, any traces of pose, of self-consciousness. His manners were alert, jerky, a little shrill perhaps, but obviously honest. He talked with the same degree of fiery, intense interest about the music of Bach, Mozart, Schubert, Franck, Ravel, Debussy, that he showed in discussing his own music. His nature appeared an extraordinarily simple one, frank and beautifully childish. To sum up, he appeared to be what is pungently if inelegantly called in modern Americanese "on the level."

I am laying so much stress upon these personal details because, in so far as I can see, they furnish us with the only clue, data or whatever one ought to call it, that we possess regarding the most salient musical phenomenon of our time. For this Ornstein certainly is. He is a salience just as Billy Sunday is a salience. You may experience extremities of admiration or abhorrence for these gentlemen, but you cannot ignore them. And what is more, you cannot analyze them, for they represent, I think, a peculiar, indefinable, psychological force rather than a concrete and easily discernible point of view and manipulation of material. For instance, I do not believe that it is possible to subject the activities of Ornstein to a sheerly impersonal analysis. I may be wrong, but that is the way I see it. One can say that they enjoy Ornstein's music or that they dislike it, that it interests them or that they think it a hideous, abominable, outrageous manifestation, but when one sits down in cold blood to inspect it from the abstract standpoint, what is there for one to say? I am willing to view art from the abstract standpoint, to subject it to a sheerly critical scrutiny, but that is never an easy thing to do, and in the

case of Ornstein it is well nigh impossible. The artist of to-day has constituted himself so domineeringly a law unto himself that we are totally deprived of whatever standards we ever had to guide us in writing about him, and criticism is become even a less exact science than heretofore.

I have introduced the personal note in this article in order to submit whatever testimony I have to the high degree of integrity that actuates the activities—I had almost said antics—of Ornstein. To say that an artist is sincere is to state one of the stock banalities of perfunctory criticism, but in the present instance emphasis must be laid on the fact in view of the vehement and cataclysmic assault Ornstein makes upon our sense of propriety, our sense of beauty and—it must be confessed—our sense of the ridiculous.

I take the liberty of jotting down the following few hints. I exonerate Ornstein of any charge of insincerity that may be brought against him. In so far as I know him (I am repeating myself for the sake of emphasis) his soul is untainted by the faintest speck of conscious deception. People have told me that he is a poseur when he thinks (may I be allowed a bit of vernacular?) that he can get away with it. Well, I have never seen this side of him. He appeals to me as a simple, unspoiled, ardent, sensitive human being, full of fine normal feelings and senses of obligation and sympathies for other people's interests and welfare. That is the way I sum up the spiritual identity of the composer of the *Wild Men's Dance*.

But there is something more to be said. Granting all this, it obviously does not follow that Ornstein's music is any the better for it. Granting him superlative sincerity will not help his music one iota if the music itself is bad music. I am inclined to accept unreservedly the remarkable claim Ornstein makes to the effect that his music is an absolutely spontaneous thing, that he merely transmits to you certain sounds that come to him. Of course, many people believe that Ornstein prevaricates; they believe that, consciously or otherwise as the case may be, he premeditatedly elaborates his peculiar music. Ornstein denies this. He claims that these sounds are the spontaneous reflex of certain mental images and conceptions that come all unbidden to the surface of his mind. Now in the past we had something approximating a test of whether a music was a genuine, inspired music or whether it was not. For instance, we say Tchaikovsky is weaker than Brahms on the side of depth and profundity of thought. We mean that a certain sequence of notes arranged

with a certain sense of inevitability represents in music something of the same degree of intellectual effort and capacity that an arrangement of words represents in literature. The ability to think coherently and consecutively, to concentrate, amplify and compress, is as essentially a part of a Beethoven symphony or a Wagner music drama as it is of a philosophical essay or a poem of Browning's. Now we know that the quality of a Brahms thought as represented by this certain sequence of notes is weightier and deeper than the quality of a Tchaikovsky thought. In this one respect—and this one only—Brahms is the greater composer of the two. To continue the example we would say that Brahms' thought was of the consistency of—well, Matthew Arnold occurs to me or Browning with the dramatic element eliminated, whereas Tchaikovsky's thought was of the unstable consistency of—say Swinburne. We would reverse the comparison when we come to a dozen other phases.

But what shall we say of Ornstein's music? We cannot say it *thinks* because Ornstein eliminates a thematic continuity; in place of a melodic line, a thematic material which is, as I have said, music's equivalent to a significant sequence of the written or the spoken word, Ornstein gives us masses of shrill, hard dissonances, chords consisting of anywhere from eight to a dozen notes made up out of half tones heaped one upon the other. To my ears color is eliminated from this music; it is merely a black and white. Now whether it possesses a sequence or not—that is to say, whether these masses of crackling, screaming sound follow one another because they are impelled to do so by some occult inner dictation, or whether they are a mere idiosyncrasy expressing itself, I do not know. Ornstein says that these chords obey as impeccable an inevitability as the *Meistersinger Overture*, that, in other words, one chord of the *Wild Men's Dance* or the *Notre Dame* follows another through the irresistible urging of some mysterious spiritual force.

To me it is not inconceivable that a human ear can hear these sounds as separate entities. I do not doubt for a moment that Ornstein hears them as such. I am willing to believe that each chord possesses for him its own peculiar intrinsic significance. I do not doubt that it is for him a perfect expression of the sensation back of it. But is it not too often incoherent from the very excess of its own vehemence? Sound as projected by Ornstein may be merely an acute development of the harmonic side of music *via* Strauss, the later Debussy, Schönberg and so on. But for me it is so acute that it neutralizes itself. When I heard Gabrilowitsch play the five piano pieces of Schönberg, Opus 19, I heard an

absolutely sterile kind of sound. In other words, my ears did not report to me with a compelling conviction that one chord of Schönberg's followed another because it had to. I "registered" no impression of a pregnant and irresistible necessity. If I had played this music backwards I should have been able to detect the difference in sound, but I should not have experienced a different degree of emotion one way or the other.

My attitude towards Ornstein is that of a well wisher. I want to be convinced. I am open to any argument. No living human being can afford to dismiss a contemporary phenomenon, and Ornstein certainly is a phenomenon. One says to one's self that there must be some reason for a power such as we see in Ornstein. For it is a power—there is no possible argument over that. Think of the degree of sheer nervous and spiritual energy expended in Ornstein's performance of the *Wild Men's Dance*! Think of the unearthly, demoniacal strength required merely to grasp the notes and throw them out with the velocity attained by Ornstein. But I sometimes wonder whether it is a constructive power. Ornstein's conscious integrity is unimpeachable, but are the subconscious promptings back of his art constructive promptings? Ornstein's intentions may be—indeed are—of the highest degree of honesty and earnestness. But this does not necessarily imply that what Ornstein does is valuable. Even though we assume that he acts as a mere passive transmitter, we cannot be sure that the quality of his inspiration is worthy of being expressed. To say that his music acutely expresses himself does not compensate for the fact that it may be utterly meaningless to us. A certain chord may represent to me a perfect expression of pain, cold, isolation, terror; it may represent absolutely nothing to you but a hideous, unjustifiable cacophony.

Now Ornstein is to be commended for the fact that, contrary to the present custom, he does not go around breathing defiance, asserting some petty formula and condemning everything that is not just as he is. He goes quietly about his business. His progressiveness is not counterfeit. He plays music other than his own with a high degree of charm and loveliness. His is the most subtle, inveigling, intimate piano playing we have had since De Pachmann. He possesses to a superlative degree the clairvoyant faculty. And yet I note disquieting symptoms in his piano playing and in his views on music. A brief cataloguing of the idiosyncrasies of his that I have noticed point, I think, to a lack of a superlative stability of judgment. I jot down a few trivial indications.

Ornstein's piano playing, often superlatively tender and caressing, errs at times on the side of a false emphasis, a tendency to over-sentimentalize, a too precious preciousness. His tendency in the direction of a tempo too slow may be noted. He dumbfounded me once by turning the coda of Chopin's *F minor Ballade* into a kind of andantino. He explains his mellifluous interpretation of Debussy's *Jardins sous la Pluie* on the ground that the important thing is not the rain but the *gardens under the rain*. His opinions on music are extremely vivid and interesting, but I do not think they are convincing. For instance, he is inclined, as I remember it, to place Schumann above Chopin. An abnormal appraisal! I have heard him select the *F minor Ballade of Chopin* for special praise. It is not too much to say that the *F minor Ballade* is the weakest in melodic interest and the weakest structurally of any of Chopin's larger compositions. He is inclined to undervalue Tchaikovsky. Perhaps his views on Wagner are supremely significant. He commits the fatal error of ranking *Meistersinger* Wagner's greatest work, and contemptuously disposing of *Tristan* and the *Ring*. Inexcusable idiosyncrasy! Who of us does not love *Meistersinger*? But to compare *Meistersinger* to *Tristan* or the *Ring* is to compare the chatter of a village gossip to the shriek of a northeaster, the roar of a mid-winter sea, the crash of the thunderbolt. He that is insensible to the elemental grandeur, pathos, humanity and beyondness of the *Ring* is either unawakened spiritually or permanently incapable of perceiving and reacting to the pre-eminent emotions, aspirations and defeats of mankind. The emphasis he lays on Moussorgsky is a legitimate reflex of his dominant characteristic and, incidentally, the dominant characteristic of most modern art. I mean the tendency in the direction of an uncurbed, uncensored, instinctive, indiscriminate expression, expression first and last at the expense of that poise, that satisfying equitableness that was once assumed to be the indispensable concomitant of all great art. There was a time when the artist accepted as a fundamental precept the fact that however much he wanted to express himself he must express himself beautifully or not at all. To-day he is concerned sheerly in expression—the beauty must take care of itself. To-day's professed admiration for work of an energetic, original, but, too often, undisciplined character may represent a valuable impulse towards a future consummation, but it fails to supply us with an actual, immediate and supreme achievement. The music of Ornstein, to a lesser or greater degree as you choose, is, I believe, an audacious experimentation rather than an

accomplished beauty. For my part, I would say the same of Mousorgsky. Artists of this type are necessary; they contribute much that is valuable, but they do not supply us with that ultimate integration that marks the supreme masterwork. One would not commit the indiscretion of comparing them with the supreme masterwork if they themselves did not compel a comparison by their own valuations of themselves and disparagement of others. When these gentlemen throw their tentative trifling with effects, their preoccupation with sensation or sheer sound or sheer instrumental color into a challenge of a conception such as the last act of *Tristan*, let us say, we realize the pathetic invalidity of their scope, their vision, their judgment. The third act of *Tristan* is perhaps emotional art's high-water mark; nowhere else is concentrated so profound, significant and explosive a contents of spiritual and neurotic activity. It is Music's *King Lear*. But mark the intellectual strength that grasps in both hands this welter of almost intolerable anguish, holding it tenaciously, building climax in superb juxtaposition to climax, shaping a supreme and impeccable consistency out of the hallucinations of a fever-stricken, vision-haunted brain. We call this great art, just as we call the *Death and Apotheosis* of Strauss great art despite its tawdry, meretricious trimmings. Here we see art's various elements subordinating themselves to the commands of the master-builder who builds with the great end of the perfect whole in view.

The failure of modern music is, I think, its failure to hold in equitable relationship its various components, to work as with a foreordained and inspirational instinctiveness towards the goal of an ultimate and satisfying symmetry. It supplies us, perhaps, with a unique sensation; it fails to supply us with an indispensable utterance. That it has furnished us with a new kind of sound is indisputable, but it has not yet co-ordinated this sound with a significant appeal to the fundamentals of our human nature. It is sound that hints perpetually at the sinister and the supernatural; at times it seems full of the whirring and screaming of black wild wings in headlong hurry under winter skies. It is a strange, screeching, groaning kind of sound—a veritable travail of sound. In Schönberg and Ornstein it is devoid of sun, of the gracious glow of life and the thing we have hitherto believed to be beauty. In Loeffler, Ravel, Debussy, it is a very evanescent stirring and quivering of heat waves, of silver distances, of faint golden horn-callings out of an immemorial past. More and more has sound attempted to go beyond our conscious limitations, our mortal recognitions, to commemorate less and less the visible world of deed

and rhythm. It is music that echoes in an underlayer of our consciousness, hypnotic, insistent music, music that lures with its waving vaporous outline, its shimmering surfaces. But in attaining this very estimable quality of a superlative subtility, an *nth* degree of intimation, modern music—all modern art, for that matter—has sacrificed the strength that is inherent in a frank, open speech. It denies us a direct statement. It denies us a substantial message. We question whether a substantial message can be delivered through a harmonic system essentially suggestive rather than definite. To sum up, is not modern music deficient in an intellectual stamina; is not an inability to think vigorously and profoundly its dominant characteristic?

I would suggest that we are predisposed to think and feel and appraise within the infinitesimal limits of our convenience, our epoch, our environment. Without taking my own point of view at all seriously, I submit that no one of our contemporary musicians is great in the sense of personal permanence, of personal survival. But as influences, as contributors to that master of the unguessable future, they are all great. And that is what I personally think the contemporary composer is—tributaries, one and all of them, to that composer of the future who will succeed Wagner as Wagner succeeded Beethoven. This composer, vaguely adumbrated by our experience of what has been, will avail himself of the contributions of these men to the development of music just as Wagner availed himself of the contributions of his predecessors and contemporaries. He will weld into an equitable and comprehensive whole elements that, exploited to the exclusive extent that they are exploited by the men of our day, impair their own validity and stultify themselves. In common with all modern art, modern music has erred, I think, in allowing a personal and original idiom to become too often a premeditated idiosyncrasy, in allowing a personal method and manner of expression to become too often a sole preoccupation. I cannot believe that the human heart and soul finds an adequate response to its inveterate needs in the exclusive cacophony of a Stravinsky, a Schönberg or an Ornstein. I do not say their contribution is negligible. I believe it is a perfectly legitimate heightening and intensifying of the harmonic side of music, just as I believe Grainger's efforts to attain a new kind of sound and a greater rhythmic emancipation are invaluable efforts. What these men do not give us is precisely what the indispensable spokesman does give us—a clear articulating of that kind of simple, unforgettable proclamation that speaks to us of immemorial failings, of divine possibilities. In all those

eminent moments in music where we feel that a great thought has been delivered, the masters are met on the cosmical common meeting ground of a stark, diatonic outspokenness. Choose what you please—the last movement of the *Fifth Symphony*, the Chopin *C minor Étude*, opus 25, the stupendous peroration pealed out by tonic, dominant and sub-dominant over the dead *Siegfried*, the last movement of Tchaikovsky's *Sixth Symphony*; here in these supreme moments, the means employed are almost identical. The sterilizing seductions and vagaries of mood are eliminated; sound stands forth a sovereign thing, not pretty nor luxuriant nor ornate, but hinting tremendously of some farther, higher scheme, austere and nobly reticent. In comparison with these moments, intricacy and color seem spurious things, and the experimentings of to-day mere travesties and caricatures of greatness.